

Pope shot *Honeydripper* with his preferred package: an Arricam Studio and Lite and Cooke S4 prime lenses. "I was very fortunate to hire Matthew Clark, a very good operator from New York who also happens to be a director of photography, and 1st AC Larry Huston, with whom I'd briefly worked on *Man of The Year*," he notes. "Both did a brilliant job." Though Sayles rarely uses two cameras, the tight schedule prompted the production to budget 10 days with a second; for that work, Pope brought in New York-based operator/cinematographer David Dunlap. "Dave originally helped me crew the picture, including recommending Tom Percarpio, my excellent gaffer," says Pope. "Dave has shot a lot of music and worked with John on his Bruce Springsteen music videos. He loves the blues and R&B and put himself up for the second camera gig. I was very pleased he did; he was the perfect choice."

Using a Phoenix crane as a ride-on or with a Power Pod, the filmmakers created long tracking shots of drilling soldiers, Sonny's arrival in town, and a big dolly push into Ty's face as he waits at the railroad depot, among other elaborate moves. The crane was also used for a shot of a group leaving a graveside funeral. The shot starts high, looking down on the mourners, then cranes down and follows two for some dialogue and finally arcs around to show Ty's daughter eyeing Sonny, who's picking cotton in the adjacent field. "That was probably the biggest move we did," says Pope. "We lucked out with beautiful light at sunset. I managed to get it in and also shoot the coverage around it before dusk."

For Pope, who is based in London, filming in Alabama was "something completely new, a real pleasure." So, too, was the opportunity to finally work with Sayles. "John is a true director and leads from the front. He's great with actors, and I think he did a great job in bringing the script, which I loved, off the page and onto the screen. I was proud to be part of it."



After watching his companion self-destruct following a failed attempt to become human, a robot attempts to commit "suicide" by setting himself ablaze in *Electroma*.

Daft Punk's Sci-Fi Vision

by Iain Stasukevich

"We've always been interested in technology and the relationship between humans and machines, working the way we do with drum machines, synthesizers and amplifiers," says Thomas Bangalter, one-half of the French electronic-music duo Daft Punk and director of photography for *Electroma*, their feature-film debut. "In movies, it's the same."

Not coincidentally, it was a love of movies that led a young Bangalter and future bandmate Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo to become fast friends. The two met in elementary school and bonded over the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick and Brian De Palma. Although the duo's résumé includes a number of music videos and an animated feature, *Electroma* was designed to prove their skills as legitimate filmmakers.

It was during the filming of the music videos for *Electroma*'s first album, *Homework*, that Bangalter and Homem-Christo began to learn the ins and outs of filmmaking. Taking the knowledge they'd gleaned from directors Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry and Roman Coppola, the duo directed the video for their track "Fresh." In 2005, while filming the videos for the *Human*

After All album, they hatched a plan for a feature-length, live-action movie.

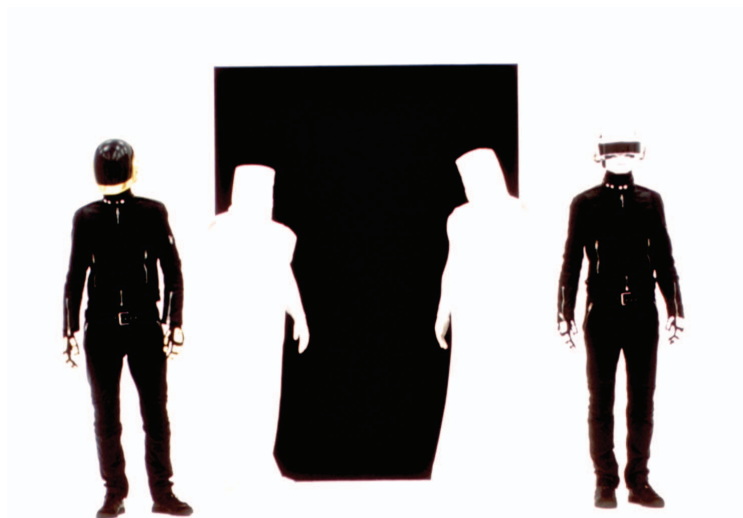
Electroma tells the tale of two robots (played by Peter Hurteau and Michael Reich) on a journey to become human. Over the course of 74 minutes, the story unfolds like an avant-garde mash-up of *Easy Rider* (shot by Laszlo Kovacs, ASC) and *THX-1138* (photographed by Albert Kihn and David Myers). No dialogue is spoken; the viewer must glean many of the ambiguous plot points through subtle and not-so-subtle visual cues. "We just wanted to make something experimental and weird," says Homem-Christo. "We felt we needed to create an open door for interpretation, so from the beginning, it was a matter of working more with emotions, images and symbols than words." Bangalter adds, "Because the film is so visual, the direction and cinematography merged. We wanted to focus on cinematography as a storytelling device, so we had to convey emotion with textures and images instead of words."

In the years preceding *Electroma*, Bangalter studied intently to learn the cinematographer's craft. He had worked closely with the camera departments on the group's videos, but on *Electroma*, he would take everything on his shoulders. At one point, he purchased more than 200 back issues of

Frame grabs courtesy of Daft Arts and Vice.

Right: During their journey to become human, the robots make their way down a black hallway to an all-white operating room, where they undergo a surgical transformation. Cinematographer Thomas Bangalter says, "Our goal with the White Room was to create a kind of Rorschach-inkblot effect that would induce the viewer to be in touch with the symbolic nature of the scene."

Below: Reflections were a challenge throughout the shoot. Most of the time, Bangalter and key grip Josh Linkey were able to solve the problem by positioning the camera in "dead spots" in the robots' helmets and using a black or white sheet for camouflage; when hiding the camera was impossible, visual-effects artists at Method Studios painted it out.



American Cinematographer at an auction and scoured them for useful techniques. Meanwhile, Homem-Christo found he felt more comfortable in the background, where he could pay more attention to the framing and acting: "We worked very much in the same way we do when we're working on our music. Thomas is always in front of the speakers, tweaking the notes, and I'm always in the studio, trying to get a more complete view of what we're hearing. It was the same on the movie; Thomas was always very close to the camera and the subject, and I was always behind him. It was the same close experience we've had all these years making music. The only real difference was that we had a lot of other people [with us] on the set, whereas in the studio, it's just the two of us."

Electroma was shot in 11 days over a two-month period. Bangalter and

Homem-Christo were taken with what they call "the crazy California landscapes" and scouted for exteriors in Barstow, Independence and Mexicali. All interior scenes were shot onstage at Hollywood Center Studios. Carrying their music-video crew over to *Electroma* was an essential move. "There were people working with us who had an understanding of both my determination and lack of experience," says Bangalter. "I think it's good to be practiced and educated, but if you're still learning the rules, you tend to break them more."

After carefully testing every film stock available at the time (2005), Bangalter decided to shoot the entire picture on Kodak Vision 250D 5246. Although he found this strategy a bit limiting at the time, he says it also provided him with consistent color and grain structure across day, night, interior and exterior scenes. When the time

came to start filming, he outfitted an Arri 435 primarily with zoom lenses (a Canon 17-35mm, a Minolta 28-70mm and an Angenieux 25-250mm) to facilitate faster shooting. A set of Zeiss primes was kept on standby, and these were used for several shots. (The camera package was supplied by Otto Nemenz.)

The first scene of the movie — and the first that was shot — reflects one of Bangalter's key influences. The robot heroes are driving along an empty California highway as the camera tracks with them, zooming in and out, panning across the desert landscape, tilting up to the sky and down to the road. The sequence calls to mind the memorable highway scenes Kovacs crafted for *Easy Rider*. "I admire a lot of cinematographers who worked in the '70s," Bangalter notes, adding ASC members Vilmos Zsigmond and Gordon Willis to his list of influences. "A lot of films that came out between 1968 and 1984 are filled with great images and bold styles. *Electroma* is an homage to how cinematography has touched us in all the films we've ever seen."

In discussing their approach to *Electroma*, Bangalter and Homem-Christo speak frequently of experimentation and risk-taking. Their tactics involved adapting the camera to the environment at all times and doing all of the effects — and as much of the image manipulation as possible — in-camera.

The first example of this strategy is a sequence they refer to as "The White Room," shot in a set comprising a 30'-long black corridor terminating in an operating room surrounded by a three-sided white cyclorama. In the scene, the robots transform into human beings. Gaffer Simon Thirlaway lit everything from above using a single large chicken-coop rig behind thick, white diffusion. According to Bangalter, this created a flat, even look that didn't require any relighting during the full day of shooting on the set. Bangalter also deliberately overexposed every shot in the sequence to eliminate depth and detail.

By creating an extremely contrasty, almost monochromatic image, the filmmakers were able to



Amid the desolate expanse of a playa, one of the robots studies the debris of his destroyed companion. "The lake bed reflected a lot of light; it was really bright there," says Bangalter. "We ended up having to use an ND.9 and an ND.6 to bring the exposure down at least 5 stops. Most of it was shot at T4½ in plain daylight without pushing or pulling the film."



devise clever optical illusions, including shots in which shapes and bodies appear out of nowhere and float across the room. To achieve this effect, Bangalter pushed the limits of the negative, overexposing by 2 stops in the lab and then putting the film through a quick digital grade at FotoKem in Burbank with colorist Mato Der Avanessian. "The stimuli are in the contrast," notes Bangalter. "We wanted each scene to take you through the emotionally distinct phases of the story. Our goal

with the White Room was to create a kind of Rorschach-inkblot effect that would induce the viewer to be in touch with the symbolic nature of the scene."

For a sequence later in the film, Bangalter and Homem-Christo sought to create images with just two colors, blue and black. In the scene, which was shot day-for-night, the main characters are chased out of town and walk along railroad tracks that cut across a vast desert. The filmmakers accomplished the look with nothing more than a regular Tiffen

day-for-night filter and an ND.9, with Bangalter skirting the toe of the negative. He decided against using any kind of key light, lest the details spoil the effect. "You have the dark-blue sky and the silhouettes of the robots, which had to be black so as not to give off any reflections," he says. "We had to take it to the extreme, where it's so dark it starts to be believable."

Reflections were a persistent hurdle for much of the shoot. With the exception of one sequence, the main characters sport masks that function like curved, polished mirrors. "We had to be very tricky about it — the masks reflected everything around them," says Bangalter.

Most of the time, Bangalter and key grip Josh Linkey were able to position the camera in "dead spots" in the robots' helmets and use a black or white sheet for camouflage. When hiding the camera was impossible, visual-effects artists at Method Studios in Santa Monica painted it out.

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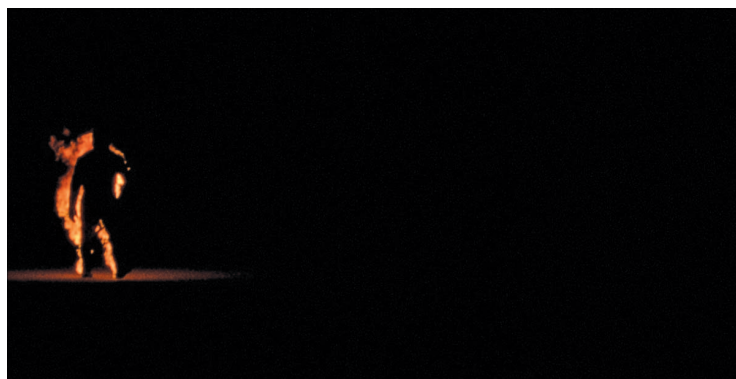


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One particularly thorny sequence shows the robots traversing a wide, barren playa; the production had to park its vehicles and staging areas far away from the actual location. "Being in the dry lake bed was like being in a 360-degree cyclorama," Bangalter says, adding that this was one reason movie lights were rarely used. "That's why we were exposing for the environment — for their heads, really." Bangalter stacked multiple ND filters in front of the lens to achieve proper exposure while keeping depth of field as shallow as possible. "The lake bed reflected a lot of light; it was really bright there. We ended up having to use an ND.9 and an ND.6 to bring the exposure down at least 5 stops. Most of it was shot at T4⅓ in plain daylight without pushing or pulling the film."

The final shot of *Electroma* shows a robot on fire walking in slow motion across the playa at night. The filmmakers chose to encapsulate the action in a single, lingering setup. The resultant



After using his helmet's glass visor to focus the sun and set himself on fire, the remaining robot walks across the playa.

image lasts four minutes onscreen, but it was captured in about 50 seconds with the camera running at 150 fps. Even at such high speeds, the inferno was so powerful that Bangalter had to stop down to T11. "That shot took a lot of testing to get right," he says. "There were times when what we were trying to accomplish wasn't explained specifically in our reference material, so we needed to do a lot of experimentation beforehand. We could have used digital effects, but the result is much more

satisfying and magical when you do it chemically."

"*Electroma* is really slow and meditative, more like a painting than an actual movie, but shooting it was actually quite the opposite of what you see on the screen," notes Homem-Christo. "We worked a lot and slept a little. Decisions were being made in the moment, so things sometimes got really hectic. Fortunately, the crew seemed to enjoy working with us. We learned a lot, and it made for a fantastic experience." ■

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